

## SERMON 286

### ON THE BIRTHDAY OF THE MARTYRS PROTASE AND GERVASE

Date: 428<sup>1</sup>

*Martyrs are witnesses, who are prepared to testify  
to Christ even to the death*

1. Martyrs—the word is Greek, but is now in common use in English<sup>2</sup>—are called “witnesses” in English. So there are true martyrs and false ones, because there are true, and false, witnesses. But scripture says, *the false witness shall not go unpunished* (Prv 19:5.9). If the false witness will not escape punishment, neither will the true witness be denied a crown. And it was, indeed, easy to bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ and the truth, because he is God; but to do so to the death, that was a great work.

There were some leaders of the Jews, mentioned by the gospel, who had believed in the Lord Jesus; but because of the Jews, it says, they did not dare confess him publicly. And straightaway a note is added to the chapter; the evangelist, you see, goes on to say, *For they loved glory with men more than with God* (Jn 12:42-43). So there were some people who would be ashamed to confess Christ before men;<sup>3</sup> while there were others, already better, who would not be ashamed to confess Christ before men, but who could not confess him to the death. These things, you see, are in the gift of God; and sometimes they are nursed in the soul step by step.

First of all pay attention to a comparison of these three with each other; one who believes in Christ, and is so timid he can scarcely whisper the name of Christ; another who believes in Christ, and publicly confesses Christ; a third who confesses Christ, and is prepared in his confession to die for Christ. The first of these is so weak, that what defeats him is shame, not fear; the second already puts on a brave front, but not yet to the shedding of his blood; the third has everything, so that there is nothing left to be desired. He fulfills, you see, what is written: *Contend for truth's sake even to the death* (Sir 4:28).

*The comparison illustrated in the case of Peter*

2. What can we say about Peter? He preached Christ, he was sent, he proclaimed the gospel already before the Lord's passion. We know, after all,

that the apostles were sent out to preach the gospel;<sup>4</sup> Peter, then, was sent, and he preached. How much had he overcome those Jews, the man who was later on afraid to confess Christ publicly? But still, he wasn't yet the equal of Protase and Gervase. He was already an apostle, he was the first, he was very close to the Lord; he was told, *You are Peter* (Mt 16:18). But he still wasn't Protase and Gervase, still wasn't Stephen, still wasn't the boy Nemesianus;<sup>5</sup> Peter still wasn't in that class. He wasn't yet what a number of women have been, what Agnes, what Crispina have been;<sup>6</sup> Peter still wasn't in the class of these women, with all the weakness of their sex.

I will certainly praise Peter; but first I must blush for Peter. How ready his spirit! But without the slightest idea of how to take its own measure. Because of course, if it hadn't been ready, he wouldn't have said to the Savior, "I will die for you": *Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you* (Mt 26:35). But the doctor, who knew how to take his pulse, foretold the dangerous climax of the fever. *You*, he says, *are laying down your life for me?* Recognize the correct order; I must first lay down mine. *You are laying down your life for me? Amen I tell you, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times* (Jn 13:38). The doctor foretold what the sick man didn't know. In this way the sick man discovered that his self-assurance had been totally misplaced, when he was questioned, *You are one of them, aren't you?* (Mk 14:67). The maid who questioned him was the fever. Look, the fever has reached its climax,<sup>7</sup> it has taken hold. What am I to say? Look, Peter is in grave danger, look, Peter is dying.

What else is dying, after all, but denying life? He denied Christ, he denied life, he died. But the one who raises the dead, *the Lord, looked round at him, and he wept bitterly* (Lk 22:61-62). By denying he perished, by weeping he rose again. And the Lord died first for him, as was fitting; and later on Peter died for the Lord, as right order required; and the martyrs followed. The previously thorny track was paved, and worn smooth by the feet of the apostles, made easier for those who were going to follow.

*The martyrs proclaimed Christ more effectively  
when dead than when alive*

3. The earth has been filled with the blood of the martyrs<sup>8</sup> as with seed, and from that seed have sprung the crops of the Church. They have asserted Christ's cause more effectively when dead than when they were alive. They assert it today, they preach him today; their tongues are silent, their deeds echo round the world. They were arrested, bound, imprisoned, brought to trial, tortured, burnt at the stake, stoned to death, run through, fed to wild beasts. In all their kinds of death they were jeered at as worthless; but *precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints* (Ps 116:15).

Precious then in the Lord's sight only, now in our sight too. Then, you see, when being a Christian was a disgrace, the death of the saints was worthless in the sight of men. They were execrated, held to be an abomination, held up as

accursed: "May you die like that, be crucified like that, be burnt to death like that." Now, though, is there any of the faithful who would not welcome such curses?

*The discovery of the remains of Protase and Gervase in Milan in 387*

4. So today, brothers and sisters, we are celebrating the memorial set up in this place in honor of Saints Protase and Gervase, the martyrs of Milan. Not the day when it was set up here, but the day we are celebrating today is the day of the discovery of the death of his saints, precious in the sight of the Lord, by bishop Ambrose, that man of God. Of that glorious occasion for the martyrs I was myself also a witness. I was in Milan, I know about the miracles that occurred, when God bore witness to the precious deaths of his saints, so that by means of those miracles that death might be precious not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.<sup>9</sup>

A blind man, well known to the whole city, had his sight restored; he ran, he had himself led to the spot, he went home without a guide. I haven't heard that he died; perhaps he's still alive. He vowed that he was going to serve all the rest of his life in that basilica of theirs, where their bodies are. We all rejoiced at his being able to see, we left him there at his service.

*God does not restore everyone to health through the martyrs, but to all who imitate the martyrs, he does promise immortality*

5. God never stops bearing witness; and he knows the right way to bring his miracles to our notice. He knows how to act, so that they may be famous; he knows how to act, so that they don't become commonplace. He doesn't grant health to everyone through the martyrs; but to all who imitate the martyrs, he does promise immortality. What he doesn't give to everyone should not be sought by anyone he doesn't give it to; and those he doesn't give it to must take care not to grumble against him, so that he may give them what he does promise at the end. After all, even those people too who are now cured, die sooner or later; those who rise again at the end will live with Christ for ever.

The head has preceded us; he is waiting for the members to follow; then the whole body, Christ and the Church, will be complete. May he count us as inscribed there; and may he give us in this life what is best for us. He, you see, is the one who knows what is best for his children. *So if you, he says, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? (Mt 7:11).* What good things? Not temporal ones, surely? He does give those too; but he also gives them to unbelievers. He does give those too; but he gives them also to the godless. We should be looking for the good things which we don't share with evil persons.

That Father knows how to give these good things to his children. Now a child of his asks for health of body; and he doesn't give it, he continues to chastise.

But is the Father,<sup>10</sup> when he chastises, not providing anything? He brandishes the rod, but just think what an inheritance he is getting ready. *He chastises, it says, every son whom he receives. For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines* (Heb 12:6). The reason I'm saying all this, my dear brothers and sisters, is that you shouldn't be disheartened when you ask and don't receive, and conclude that God hasn't got you in mind, if at the moment he doesn't pay attention to your wishes. The doctor, after all, doesn't always pay attention to the patient's wishes, although he is undoubtedly attending to his health and aiming at it. He doesn't give what the patient asks for; but he is attending to what he doesn't ask for. He asks for ice cream,<sup>11</sup> he doesn't give it. Has he turned out cruel, the one who came to cure? It's his skill, not his cruelty. He doesn't give on the spot what gives the patient pleasure; some things are denied him while he's not yet well, so that when he does get well he may be able to take anything.

*Comparison between the three boys in the fiery furnace,  
and the seven Maccabee brothers*

6. Think a bit about God's promises. What about these very martyrs? Do you suppose he gave them everything they requested? No. Many of them hoped they would be let off, and let off with some miracle, as the three boys<sup>12</sup> were let out of the fiery furnace. What were the words of king Nebuchadnezzar? *Since they hoped in him, he said, and changed the word of the king* (Dn 3:28). What a testimonial, from the man who was trying to kill them! He wanted them burnt to death, and later came to believe through them. If they had died in the fire, they would have received the crown of martyrdom in secret, and it would have been no good to this king. That's why they were preserved for a time, so that the unbeliever might come to believe, the one who had condemned them might come to praise God.

The God of the three boys was the same as the God of the Maccabees. He delivered the first ones from the fire, he had the latter die in the fire.<sup>13</sup> Did he chop and change? Did he love those more than these? A more splendid crown was given to the Maccabees. True, the others escaped the fire; but they were preserved for the perils of this world; these finished with all such perils in the fire. There remained no other trial or temptation, but only a victors' coronation. So the Maccabees received more.

Shake up your faith, bring the eyes of your hearts to bear, not your human eyes. You have other ones inside, after all, which God made for you. He opened the eyes of your hearts, when he gave you faith. Question those eyes: who got more, the Maccabees, or the three boys? I'm questioning your faith; if I were to question people who love this world—"I would rather be with the three boys" is what the weak soul says to me. Blush for shame in the presence of the mother of the Maccabees, who wanted her sons to die before herself, because she knew they weren't dying.<sup>14</sup>

*The martyrdom of the sickbed*

7. I on occasion am reminded of the leaflets on the miracles of the martyrs, which are read in your presence. A few days ago a leaflet was read, in which a sick woman, wracked with the severest pains said, "I can't bear it." The martyr, to whom she had come to be healed,<sup>15</sup> said, "What if you were enduring martyrdom?" So it is that many people endure martyrdom on their sickbeds, very many indeed. Satan has a certain method of persecution, more hidden and cunning than the ones he employed in those times. A believer is lying in bed, wracked with pain; he prays, he isn't listened to; or rather, he is listened to, but he is being tested, being put through his paces, being chastised in order to be received as a son.

So while he's being wracked with pain, along comes trial and temptation by tongue; either some female, or a man, if man he can be called, approaches the sickbed, and says to the sick man, "Tie on that *muti*,<sup>16</sup> and you will get better; let them apply that charm, and you will get better. So-and-so, and So-and-so and So-and-so; ask, they all got better by using it." He doesn't yield, he doesn't agree, he doesn't give his consent; he has to struggle, all the same. He has no strength, and he conquers the devil. He becomes a martyr on his sickbed, and he is crowned by the one who hung for him on the tree.

## NOTES

1. Perler and Lambot actually argue, more vaguely, for a date between 426 and 430. Others say about 425; in any case, on 19 June. One manuscript gives Argentarium as the place—a place otherwise entirely unknown. Perler argues persuasively for a place very near Hippo Regius, where a shrine, a *memoria* had been dedicated to the two Milanese martyrs. The name clearly has something to do with silver, or money. It can mean a bank. I suggest it should be translated "at the Mint." Not that there would have been a mint there at this time; but there very probably had been one when Hippo really had been Regius, or Royal—a mint for the Numidian kings. And the name could have stuck as the name of a suburb of the city. About Protase and Gervase, see section 4 below, note 9.

2. Latin, of course, in the text.

3. See Mk 8:38; Mt 10:32-33.

4. See Mt 10:5-42; Lk 9:2-10.

5. An otherwise unknown boy martyr. But an entry in the Carthaginian calendar for 22 December runs, "the feast of Saint Nemesianus," and he is probably the one Augustine is referring to here.

6. Saint Agnes was the famous girl martyr of Rome, martyred at the age of 12 or 13, celebrated in sermons by Ambrose and all subsequent Latin Fathers. There is uncertainty about which persecution she suffered in, whether in the middle of the third century, or the beginning of the fourth. Her feast is kept on 21 January, and the accounts of her martyrdom are all held to be entirely legendary.

Saint Crispina was a married woman of high rank and a mother, martyred on 5 December 304 at Theveste in Africa, and the account of her martyrdom is generally considered to be authentic. It contains an account of her interrogation by the judge, the proconsul Anulinus. When he lost patience with her "obstinacy," he first ordered her head to be shaved, to shame her in front of the crowd. If he hoped that would induce her to do what was required and offer incense to the statues of the

emperors, he cannot have been much of a student of psychology; it would surely only make her all the more eager to die. Then he sentenced her to be beheaded.

7. The Latin medical term for the climax of a fever is *accessio*. The verb, used here, is *accedo*. But this also means to approach, to come up. So the maid came up to Peter and stuck to him (she repeated her charge, with the same result, a second time). Augustine, seeing her as the symbol of the fever, says, literally, “Look, the fever has come up to him; look, it is sticking to him.”

8. Again an apparent misplacement of the genitive. The text reads, *sanguinis impleta est martyribus*, has been filled with the martyrs of blood. Admittedly, *sanguinis* could be construed with “seed”: the earth has been filled with martyrs, as with the seed of blood. But that reads just as strangely.

9. The only thing known about these Milanese martyrs is the discovery of their bodies by Saint Ambrose on 17 June 386, which Augustine talks about here. It happened after his conversion, but several months before his baptism. Ambrose describes the discovery in a letter to his sister Marcelina (Letter 22: PL 16, 1019-1026). He wished to dedicate a new basilica, and the people said that it must have proper relics to sanctify it. So they went to the church of Saints Felix and Nabor (which I presume had been built in a Christian cemetery), and there they started digging in front of the chancel, in a place where Ambrose says he had found “appropriate signs.” He doesn’t say what these were. They soon found what he calls an *urna*, which usually means an urn for the ashes of the dead. But here it must mean a sarcophagus, or something like that, because in it they found the bones of two very tall men, who had been beheaded—and also, he says, much blood. If they found *bones*, this can hardly indicate that the bodies were in corrupt (section 2). Then some old men declared that they had once heard the names of these martyrs, and had read the *titulus*, the inscription on the tomb, I imagine (section 12). So that is how they knew that these giants had been Protase and Gervase. Then he tells of the cure of the blind man; his name was Severus, and he was a butcher, *publicis mancipatus obsequiis*—I think this must mean he was a municipal slave, working in the municipal slaughter house. He was healed just by touching the fringe of the pall covering the relics, as they were being transferred to Ambrose’s new basilica.

The discovery certainly proved to be a trump card in Ambrose’s hand in his running battle with the Arian Empress’ mother, Justina, over possession of important churches in the city. See also Augustine’s *Confessions* IX, 7.

10. One could also translate “a father,” making it a general statement.

11. Just *frigidam* in the Latin, with *aquam* presumably to be supplied. But a little license is permissible here, I think.

12. “Boys” in the colonial English sense of servants. The Vulgate Latin at Dn 3:95 (3:28 in RSV) calls them God’s *servos*—quite correct as a translation of the Greek *paidas*. But in older translations this was rendered *pueros*. And so Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have come down in liturgical and pious tradition as “the three holy children.” Augustine has *pueri* here, and probably understood it correctly as servants of God.

13. See 2 Macc 7.

14. See 2 Macc 7:29.

15. Reading *cui sanari venerat*, instead of the text’s *qui sanare venerat*, who had come to heal her. But did martyrs go around to the sick, or did the sick not rather go around to the martyrs at their shrines? Augustine himself introduced this custom of publicizing the miracles performed at the shrines of Saint Stephen, especially the one he had himself dedicated in Hippo Regius. See *The City of God* XXII, 6. I suppose it could be said that Saint Stephen had come to Africa to heal, when his relics were brought there. Even so, I consider my emendation to be not merely reasonable, but almost imperative.

16. The universal Southern African word for magic charms, spells, and potions of all sorts; often translated “medicine,” but as in the expression “medicine man.”